The Report Committee for Nina Leigh Vizcarrondo
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following report:

A KIND OF WILD

APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Supervisor:

Andrew Garrison

Co-Supervisor:

Anne Lewis

Caroline Frick

A KIND OF WILD

by

Nina Leigh Vizcarrondo, A.B.

Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

December 2014

Acknowledgements

I owe many thanks to all the brave souls who participated in the making of this documentary and the friends and family who supported me throughout the process. In particular, I liked to thank the stars of the film: Carl Vance, Dr. Elizabeth Carey Mungall, Joe Turner, Mitchell Wilson and Trapper Burkett.

A KIND OF WILD

Nina Leigh Vizcarrondo, M.F.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2014

Supervisors: Andrew Garrison, Anne Lewis

Gemsbok, ibex, sitatunga, nyala. Their names may be unfamiliar, but these rare species, originally from Africa and Asia, now roam Texas ranches in numbers close to 1 million. In an irony as big and as rich as Texas, however, their proliferation has depended on their popularity with hunters. Enthusiasts will pay anywhere from $2,000 to $20,000 to hunt these so-called "texotics." While this flourishing micro-economy and sub-culture has gone unrecognized by most of the world, "A Kind of Wild" is a 22 minute documentary that puts forth a portrait of the industry as illustrated through a cross-section of individuals with different roles in the system: an amateur breeder, a researcher, a ranch hand and a hunter. The film explores the paradoxical relationship between these people and the animals they care for, between economics and conservation. It is intended to spread awareness about this obscured phenomenon and to encourage audiences to reflect upon their own values concerning humans increasingly complicated impact on the natural world around us. This report chronicles the process of making the film and expounds on its challenges and lessons.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Chapter 1: Introduction

"A Kind of Wild" opens with slow motion imagery of wildebeest, gazelles and other mythical looking hoof-stock adorned with an immense variety of patterns and horns. We see sable antelope locking together their long curved horns and gemsbok cleaning her young. We follow wildebeest galloping in a close-knit herd and linger on 4-horned sheep chewing their cud. And then we are confronted with another pair of unfamiliar animals—about the size of donkeys but with tan hides, white mask-like patterns on their faces and pairs of long winding horns—only these two are set against a barbed wire fence and a fluttering American flag. The next screen presents the text, "It is estimated that there are almost one million exotic hoofed mammals roaming on Texas ranch land," and thus it is revealed that these animals are not subsisting on the plains of Africa but rather in the hill country of Texas.

Another series of animal images, which this time contain elements (cacti, drainage pipes and bales of hay) that erode the illusion of a natural habitat. Then more text reveals that "while some of these species are endangered or even extinct in their native land—here, their numbers are rapidly rising" and that "most 'texotics' are found on game ranches, where enthusiasts will pay $2,000 to $20,000 to hunt one." Thus we are introduced to the paradox and question that is central to the rest of the film: hunting can be a form of conservation, but is it the best form and can people really both love and hunt animals? The film then proceeds to explore this concept and potential conflict by portraying the experience and perspective of a cross-section of individuals who are

deeply invested in this controversial industry and these extraordinary animals, but in different ways and for different reasons.

First we meet Joe Turner, an entrepreneurial lawyer who is accumulating an array of exotics - from scimitar oryx to camels to a single zebra - on his 90-acre property. We accompany Joe and his adolescent sons as they drive their golf cart around, feeding the animals. Joe shares amusing anecdotes about his menagerie, expresses his appreciation of their beauty and shows great tenderness towards them. He also, however, emphasizes how valuable they are and how his ultimate intent is to profit from the sale of their offspring, most likely to hunting ranches. That is provided they breed of course, which they haven't done much of in the three years he's had most of them.

Soon thereafter we are introduced to Dr. Elizabeth Carey Mungall, who has been studying exotics in Texas for over 40 years, passionately researching their behavior. Dr. Mungall provides an authoritative voice, verifying that certain of these species, like the scimitar oryx, are extinct in the wild but "have been doing wonderfully in Texas." She also demonstrates a genuine excitement about animal behavior as she observes blackbuck antelope (the topic of her graduate research decades ago) through her binoculars and explains that their "tail-up, nose-down display" is the way they communicate their territoriality, a behavior she describes as marvelous. Yet she also does not express any qualms about the hunting of exotics—rather she credits hunting as "what has kept this whole activity going" because "there has to be some money…to keep the fences up, to pay the taxes, to pay a tremendous feed bill." In fact, Dr. Mungall's research is currently

funded by the Exotic Wildlife Association, which is in turn funded by hunting ranches.

Thus we segue to the subsequent characters, who are all actively involved in the hunting aspect of the industry. The first of these is Trapper Burkett who makes a living capturing and transporting exotics. As he straddles and hogties black buck and antelope and directs his helicopter crew to trip more of them up in sky-born nets, he exudes practicality and pride about his dramatic work. Axis deer and blackbuck antelope reproduce at such a rate that they could easily strip a ranch of vegetation, Trapper explains. Capturing hoof stock for relocation or hunting them prevents the herds from starving and the land from becoming barren.

Like Trapper, Mitchell Wilson involves both keeping exotics healthy and hunting them; but Mitchell works full time as a ranch hand on a single exotic game ranch. He tells us matter-of-factly about the hunts he guides and how it costs $12,000 to $20,000 to hunt the ranch's most popular species, the markhor. We also see him care for an ibex (another rare goat species) that he has determined is sick due to her lack of energy and lack of fear of humans. The scene of Mitchell treating the ibex so tenderly is hard to reconcile with the idea of him hunting one of her offspring. This paradox, which lies within all of the film's characters, is parallel to the paradox between hunting and conservation: as individuals and as a capitalist society our instincts to love and nurture are often intertwined with our desires to profit and own.

This desire to own and dominate is nowhere better exemplified than by the hunters who are the foundation of the exotic game industry, and the last person we meet

in “A Kind of Wild” is hunter Carl Vance. Carl is on the more thoughtful and humble end of the hunter spectrum, in that he’s not rich and he hunts for meat more often than he hunts for trophies. He does nonetheless, have a self-proclaimed case of “trophy syndrome” and a living room full of taxidermy to prove it. Carl’s personal philosophy about taxidermy is surprising though, as he insists, “It’s not a trophy, it’s more a souvenir from my hunt,” he says. “It’s not something I look at and I’m proud of. It’s something I look at and I remember.” Carl’s perspective may not be that of all texotics hunters but he does help answer the questions that lie at the heart of the exotic game ranch industry: why do people value these animals so highly?

Chapter 2: Pre-Production

I had decided to make a documentary as my thesis film before I even started the MFA program at UT. My plan was to take advantage of the opportunity to experiment with fiction filmmaking the first two years (who knew? maybe I'd be great at it), but then produce an ambitious**,** important documentary film for my thesis – a film that would particularly showcase my skills as an editor and launch my career as a sought-after documentary editor.

I had first been introduced to the phenomenon of exotic animals in Texas when, in college, an acquaintance had invited a group of friends to visit her family's ranch outside of Dallas. I was not able to participate in the trip, which I lamented more so when my friends came back with anecdotes and photos of run-ins with zebra, wildebeest and other exotics. This memory was rekindled by two incidents that occurred around the time I was searching for an exciting documentary topic. The first was when I came across a photo essay entitled "The Dallas Safari Club," which was a series of very formal photographs of hunters in their trophy rooms. The hunters ranged from a portly, rugged, old man in his crowed kitchenette to a stately woman, dressed in classic safari-wear, amidst a panoply of big game trophies that cover the walls of her vaulted living room. I immediately envisioned these portraits coming to life and turning into colorful interviews with extraordinary characters overflowing with unusual anecdotes. The second incident was that

around the same time I was intrigued by the offering of “local antelope” at an Austin restaurant and where and what local antelope were.

The premise for a documentary was crystalizing in my mind and I decided to dig deeper into these two related discoveries. First, I contacted David, Chancellor, the photojournalist responsible for “The Dallas Safari Club” to ask him about the people in his photographs and his advice on the subject matter. I was disappointed when his response was “I think it’s best if you make your own approaches. You'll get very different responses I'm sure; this I feel is the point of the work.” I had hoped that Mr. Chancellor would share a contact or two with me or at least tell me whether he had better luck approaching the staff of the Safari Club or its members. I decided to put the search for hunters on hold, however, because I had much better luck with the local antelope inquiry: my waiter verified that it was procured from a place called Broken Arrow Ranch.

I contacted Broken Arrow Ranch and was pleased to find that the manager, KC Barr, was very friendly and invited me to visit with him at their facility. It turned out that Broken Arrow Ranch wasn't really a ranch, but a facility that processed meat and had a staff of two professional hunters, or “harvesters” as they call them, with special permission to hunt exotics on ranches all across Texas. KC explained that Broken Arrow formed partnerships with ranch owners who were often happy to accept the extra income and eager to be rid of certain species, such as axis deer, that tend to overpopulate. When my classmate Nathan and I visited the

Broken Arrow headquarters, however, KC toured us around not only the processing facility but also the founder's nearby property, where I got the chance to see my first texotics: axis and sika deer. And while I didn't end up using any of the footage I shot at Broken Arrow in my film, I did gain valuable information on the trip—information that proved instrumental in finding my characters.

I learned a lot about the many types and particularities of Texas exotics from KC and about the norms of the exotic ranching culture and industry. Perhaps most significantly, he told me about a "60 Minutes" special that had aired in 2012, tied to a legislative battle over the hunting of certain exotic species—specifically addax, dama gazelle and scimitar oryx. These species, which came to be known as the "three amigos," had been added to the Endangered Species Act in 2005, but at the same time granted an exemption to "anyone who the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service determines to be helping increase or sustain [their] numbers is allowed to hunt or sell them."[1] In other words, if they were captive-bred on a private U.S. ranch, these species could be hunted or sold. Animal rights activists, as represented by the non-profit Friends of Animals, immediately challenged the exemption in the courts. While not nominally a party of the lawsuit, the power behind the defense came from the Exotic Wildlife Association (EWA), a 1000-plus membership organization based in Texas. In 2012, the courts ruled in favor of Friends of Animals and so the Fish and

[1] Mashhood, Faraz. "New Safeguard Poised to Change Exotic Game Hunting in Texas." *Austin American-Statesman*, April 2, 2012.

Wildlife Service established a system that required anyone who wanted to own, sell or hunt any of the three amigos, to apply for a permit that took a minimum of 30 days to receive.

The exotic game ranching and hunting community was incensed by the decision and many argued that it would cause owners to get rid of the three amigos and their numbers would plummet to a point of near extinction. Many of the people I interviewed for my film in 2013 claimed this prediction had come true but nobody could provide any data supporting the claim. Nor did the EWA release any concrete data demonstrating that the populations of the three amigos dropped after the 2012 permit ruling. While the regulations were minimal and hardly prohibitive, Charly Seale, the director of EWA, was quoted in many articles as saying: "Ranchers in this country are very private-property individuals. We bought the animals with our own money, and they're telling us what to do with them. They are not anybody's animals but ours."[2] Charly had also been the somber spokesperson for pro exotic game hunting in the "60 Minutes" piece. However, there was essentially no time to measure the impact of the regulations on the conservation of these species, because in January 2014 the decision was reversed; permits were no longer required to own, hunt or sell scimitar oryx, dama gazelle or addax.

[2] Recio, Maria. "New Rule Will Harm Endangered Antelope, Ranchers Say." *McClatchy DC News*, March 30, 2012. Accessed December 1, 2014,

I ended up omitting this legislative background over the three amigos from the film because it didn't directly impact any of my characters and would have been too much of a departure from the otherwise character-driven narrative. Plus, I wanted my documentary to explore cultural and personal microcosms in a more experiential way that the fact-driven news media didn't have the time or patience for.

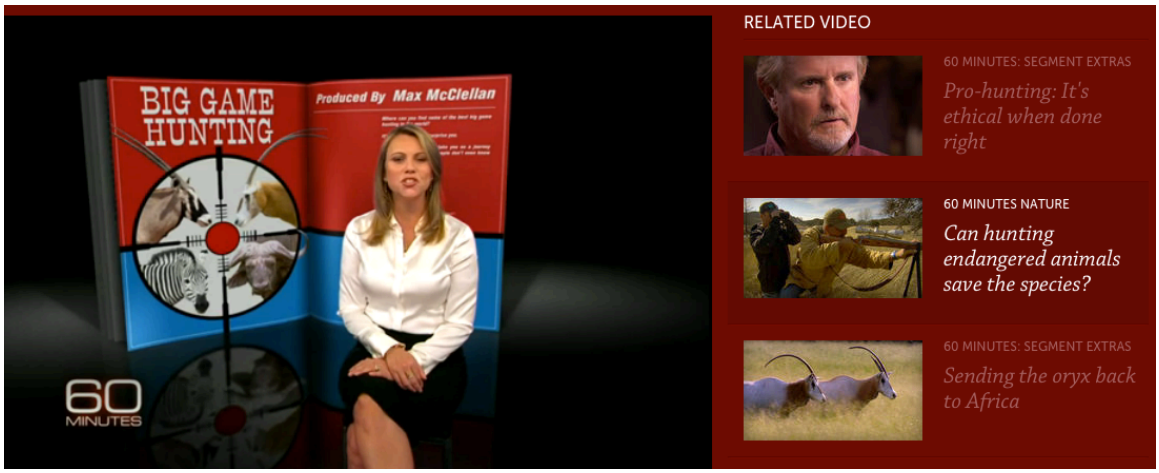

Figure 1: 60 Minutes episode "Big Game Hunting"

Chapter 3: Production

DR. MUNGALL & THE EXOTIC WILDLIFE ASSOCIATION

When I learned about the EWA from KC and the "60 Minutes" segment, I was enthused because it seemed to be a very efficient means of gaining access to and trust from a lot of folks in the texotics industry. And I was starting to realize that I was going to encounter mistrust from a lot of the people I wanted to approach. So instead of cold-calling the EWA headquarters directly, I first contacted rancher Marida Favia del Borromeo. Marida had spoken on behalf of the EWA in a state hearing on a bill that would ban the ownership of big cats and primates in high population counties. I was worried that Charly Seale would not take me seriously because I was young, a woman and not a native a Texas. But I sensed that as an intrepid woman in the man's world of ranching, Marida, would be more sympathetic towards a fellow intrepid female and thus be more receptive to my inquiries.

And not only did Marida respectfully listen to my documentary pitch and my solicitation for her assistance, she generously invited me to an EWA "Shrimp Boil" (fundraiser) that serendipitously was taking place that very weekend at a dance hall outside of Fredericksburg, Texas. So I somewhat awkwardly attended the shrimp boil by myself and, even though I wore cowboy boots, I still felt like a conspicuous city slicker. When I finally located Marida she was quite friendly and introduced me

to Charly Seale. With a firm handshake and what I deemed to be sincerity, Charly invited me to come by his office soon to film or discuss filming. However, in the following weeks, I emailed and called Charly frequently and either received no response or a variation of "I'm too busy now, I'll get back to you."

It seemed like he would keep stringing me along forever until I remembered this "Exotic Wildlife Field Guide" I had seen at the shrimp-boil. I switched tactics by asking Charly to connect me with its author, Dr. Elizabeth Carey Mungall. To this, he finally complied and when I emailed Dr. Mungall she was much more responsive. We scheduled an interview for the beginning of January and she actually suggested that we film it at the EWA headquarters, in its "animal museum" as she called it. So on a gray January morning I and my camera operator and friend, Will, drove west to Ingram Texas, to interview the very patient and articulate Dr. Mungall. [3]

At that time Dr. Mungall was in the thick of conducting research on dama gazelles on a game ranch in West Texas. Dama gazelles were one of the "three amigos," but as Dr. Mungall explained it, "the dama" were not thriving as well as other texotics because the males were often fighting and killing each other. Working with a game-capture professional*)* she had rounded up a herd of dama and equipped them with location tracking devices—a technique she called "radio-collaring." She hoped the resulting data would illuminate the territoriality habits of

[3] Charly Seale who had continually told me he was travelling or too busy, was in his office at the EWA and Dr. Mungall brought me back to say hi to him. He didn't seem too busy at all.

the dama gazelle so that ranchers would know how much space was needed to maintain a sustainable dama herd.

Dr. Mungall was going back to the dama ranch in February to round up the herd again and collect the tracking devices with her data. I would have loved to film this, but was told that I was not welcome by the landowner. Dr. Mungall's husband, Christian Mungall, however, is a talented photographer (he took many of the photographs in the Exotic Wildlife Field Guide) and he had started to dabble in videography and apparently filmed some of the radio-collaring process. But when I asked later if he would lend me a shot or two from his footage, I was told that they didn't have permission to share it with me. Christian, however, was very thoughtful in sending me the behind the scenes footage he shot of my second outing with Elizabeth. The footage I might have gotten from Mungall's dama gazelle field work could have been a wonderful addition to the film and a better way to illustrate Dr. Mungall's own paradoxical relationship with the animals. If viewers had seen her participating in the capture of the dama they would likely have found it's unavoidable violence to be a strange partner to her evident life-long passion for the animals. It would have also been great to capture footage of the dama fighting, because they look like the daintiest of the exotics. But when I went back to film with Mungall one more time I was able to capture compelling footage of blackbuck antelope fighting.

JOE TURNER, THE LANDOWNER

Soon after I had begun pursuing Broken Arrow as a documentary storyline, I had a third serendipitous experience that involved exotic game in Texas. Driving back from rock climbing at Reimers Ranch, I took a back-road route for the first time and passed a gated property where I saw what appeared to be camels, a zebra and some wildebeest. I came to halt and backed up to the entrance, which bore a large metal sign for 'Cana Cellars Winery. I was so surprised and excited by this timely discovery, that I decided it was a sign from above that I should forge ahead on a texotics documentary. But contacting the owner of the property was more difficult than I imagined, and I soon came to question my tendency to believe in "signs," as I encountered more and bigger blocks on the road to crafting this documentary.

I looked up the winery on the internet, but the most recent information was from 2003 and the phone numbers provided were not in service or wrong numbers. Finally I had a new idea and contacted the owner of a Bed & Breakfast across the road from the winery. She got back to me right away with a helpful lead:

> I actually don't know him but have heard about the owner. Per tax records it has it as Joseph Turner. He is a high-power attorney in town. Defended Willie Nelson & Matthew McConaughey. If you look him up online you can find the address of his law firm which is what is on the tax records.

And so I finally made contact with Joe Turner through his law firm's website. At that point I was starting to realize what a controversial subject matter I had

gotten myself into, so I was pleasantly surprised when Mr. Turner (Joe, as I soon came to call him) replied with: "I am excited about your project. My son had taken many film classes and wants to go to film school. We are happy to help you and you are welcome to film."

My first visit to Joe's was in October 2013 and the tour we were welcomed with was so rich with great film material that I only wish we had been more technically prepared/proficient at that point. Due to scheduling limitations and traffic Nathan and I got there only about an hour before the sunset and Joe and two of his sons were raring to go the minute we arrived. The magic hour lighting made his animals look extra beautiful, but because we didn't want to lose the light or Joe's patience we didn't do the best job with our audio and video set-up.

From the get-go it was obvious that Joe was charismatic, funny – and the rarest part – a natural in front of the camera. He was so uncensored that he often said things I worried might get him in trouble. He laughed about how "they get you drunk at the auctions so you buy things you don't need," he remarked that his "land is pretty close to Africa" and he spoke candidly about some of his animals dying during the winter. I was nervous that if I put a wireless microphone on him he might become self-conscious and censor himself. However, this resulted in distracting wind and camera noises being recorded with most of his dialogue—at least almost all of it was intelligible though. As I got to know Joe better over subsequent visits, I realized he probably wouldn't have censored himself that day

even with a lavaliere microphone on – but perhaps it was better to be safe than sorry since no one I later put a lavaliere on was nearly as candid and potentially controversial than Joe was that day.

Also because every moment seemed priceless either due to what he was saying or some amazing image of animals, we didn't want to miss a second and so also didn't pause to change to a wider lens (we were on a 25-135), which might have yielded more ultimately useful wide shots. Overall, though the footage we captured that day is still some of my favorite in the film. And I love a lot of the footage I continued to get of Joe and his animals as I went back to visit sporadically over the next year. At one point I considered making the film just about him but he was too busy and unpredictable; I'd often be driving to his place when I'd receive a text that he wouldn't be home but I was welcome to film the animals.

THE AUCTIONS

While Joe was full of entertaining and fascinating anecdotes, I was even more excited when he told me about the bi-annual auction at the YO Ranch where he buys most of his animals. He described a decadent dinner with free alcohol, where kudu and wildebeest, impala and rare giant tortoises were paraded out and bid on for thousands of dollars. My excitement was slightly dampened, however, when I found out that I had just missed the auction by a week and the next one wouldn't be for 6 months (May 2014).

Figure 2: Raz Livestock Auction

Later I learned that were two other more frequent exotics auctions in Texas—one of which, Raz Livestock Auction, occurred monthly in Hunt, TX (about 2 hours from Austin). Instead of contacting Raz to ask for permission to film, I decided my odds would be better if I paid a visit to the auction and either asked them in person - disarming them with my hopefully non-threatening presence - or managed to discreetly film without explicit permission.

The auction turned out to be even more of a cinematic spectacle than I imagined. The animals were paraded out one or two at time into a semi-circular

cage, the announcers sat in a booth directly above the cage and the crowd of a hundred or so sat in bleachers and represented a colorful array of rural Texas characters: camouflage baseball caps mingled with cowboy hats and big belts. During the goat procession, the goats kept jumping against the cage and wall at surprising new heights—until one actually jumped through the window of the announcer's booth.

This illustrative spectacle made it all the more disappointing to also be greeted with multiple signs that said "absolutely no photography." I asked the authoritative looking woman at the cashier window why they had a no photo policy, hoping it might start a conversation in which I could broker an exception. However, she barely looked at me and curtly replied something about "animal rights people" and "no exceptions." My next best scenario would have been to meet a customer who would let me film the loading up of their purchased animals—and even better, welcome me back to their ranch to film later. I did meet one friendly "customer," but it was pretty much because he was bit of an outsider as well, and although he was considering buying his first exotic (a blackbuck that his daughter wanted) he didn't end up purchasing one that day.

By the time the YO Auction came around again in May, I was doubtful that I'd get permission to film there but I figured that my best chance was to be endorsed/chaperoned by their valuable customer, Joe Turner. Upon my request, Joe kindly emailed the director of the auction (whom he called "an old friend") and

relayed my request and promise to "only film Joe and no other guests without their explicit consent." Permission was firmly denied.

MY HUNT

My friend Reed Baker, a hunter and native Austinite, also played an influential role in the genesis and execution of this film. A visit to his family's remote property in Fredricksburg ignited my thirst to pursue a project that would enable me to spend more time in the great outdoors of rural Texas. As production on the film progressed, Reed became increasingly interested in what I was uncovering and how it augmented his understanding of the Texas hunting industry—since his hunting experience was only with native game. When I told him I was having such a difficult time getting access to most of the places and people I wanted to film, he came up with a surprising suggestion for me: he told me that the best way to gain these people's trust would be to go on my own hunt. While it felt somewhat disingenuous doing something like that for the sake of a better film, I was not a vegetarian or ethically opposed to hunting for meat. For example, if a friend had ever invited me to go on a meat hunt with them, I would have gone—granted they offered to pay. And cost was still the biggest impediment to booking my own exotic meat hunt.

After much research, I found the least expensive exotic hunting opportunity

within 4 hours from Austin: a “management” hunt for a “red deer hind” on a ranch called Wendy Lou Classic Game Reserve, a “Tex-African Hunting Experience” in Dublin, TX. I soon learned that a red deer hind meant a female red deer, which is a European deer species that resembles an elk except for its red fur. And a management hunt is a discount hunt that occurs when a ranch wants to decrease its animal population because of the concern that there there won’t be enough food for the rapidly growing herds. These hunts are limited to female deer because they lack the antlers that hunters will pay significant sums for—plus eliminating a female deer also means pre-emptively eliminating all the offspring she would have. While my least expensive option, I still had to spend at least $350 on the hunt, not including the cost of gas and tip for our guide, but at least I would come away with plenty of meat and I’d heard that red deer made arguably the tastiest venison.

My guide was Mike Odell, a very friendly fellow in his late 60s who’d lived and worked on the ranch for decades. Before I had scheduled the hunt, I had told Mike that it was my first one and that I wanted to film it, partly because I was in film school, and he was totally fine with that. I did not, however, tell him I was working on a documentary about the exotic game ranch industry because I was worried it would be a deal breaker. My plan was to ask for his permission to use the footage in my film after the fact. Ultimately I didn’t end up using it for reasons I’ll address later. When Mike turned out to be so sincere and enthusiastic though it did increase my guilt for withholding my hypothetical intentions from him.

The hunt turned out to be much more challenging and exciting than I imagined, albeit quite surreal. I brought along fellow grad student Matt Koshmrl as my camera operator (he'd grown up hunting) and my friend Trevor Dickens, who generously supplied both his rifle and an extra large cooler for the meat. The three of us arrived at Wendy Lou at 8am on a Wednesday and after Mike warmed me up with a brief target practice we set out to find one of their herds of red deer.[4] We spent at least 4 hours that morning driving around the 4,750 acres of the ranch and only caught a glimpse of a herd of female red deer that were miles away when we looked out from a hill top with binoculars. We got closer to a few male red deer (stags), however, and saw plenty of other exotic species on our ride, including waterbuck, blesbok, gemsbok and zebra. Not only was I perfectly happy getting to see all these animals, I was even more pleased to hear and film Mike sharing a plethora of information and opinions about the animals, the ranch, hunting and his personal experiences with all of the above.

That afternoon, after a midday jerky break, we found a herd of red deer that contained some females. But we still couldn't get much closer than 400 yards to them in our jeep and I wouldn't be able to aim accurately at anything further than 200 yard. Thus commenced a lengthy and exhausting "spot and stalk" odyssey, in which we would get out of the jeep and take meandering, bushwacking routes to try

[4] I had shot skeet with shot gun a couple of times, but I hadn't shot a rifle until I went to practice at a shooting range a few weeks before the hunt.

and get closer to the deer. One such sojourn entailed stumbling through a dry rocky creek bed and scampering up and down the sides of the embankment, trying to get within 200 feet of the deer without them seeing us. At multiple points, I followed Mike's lead and army-crawled my way up slopes.

I actually took and missed about 5 shots that afternoon. In addition from my lack of experience or gift for hand-eye coordination, I was further challenged because I couldn't aim at just any deer. Rather, Mike had been consistently conservative and precautious so as to avoid the possibility that I would accidentally shoot a stag or more than one deer. And so when the sun started setting, I was pretty sure I was going to go home empty handed—and was frankly a bit relieved. I had tried my best and felt that I had proved I was tough and verifiably not anti-hunting, but also wouldn't have to face as much judgment from my friends and peers who *were* anti-hunting. But Mike was more fired up then ever, whipping the jeep this way and that with a wild determination and jumping out to set up "sticks" for me with the energy of a 16 year old.[5]

And so it was, that literally after the sun had just set I found myself in a cluster of trees with my rifle propped in the crook of a tree. After waiting quietly in that copse for at least 20 minutes, the herd came close enough and Mike identified a hind that was sufficiently isolated. They were still at least 150 yards away and I was pretty sure I was going to miss this last shot too. But when Mike told me to fire I did,

[5] "Sticks" is what Mike called the collapsible bamboo tripod he carried around for me to rest my long shotgun on when it was time to aim.

and was stunned to see the deer drop like stone. Mike was thrilled, whooping and hollering, but my pride was quelled when I saw the deer struggle to a stand again and limp into some nearby bushes. Mike told me she wouldn't last long, but I really wanted him to put her out of any pain, so I asked him to shoot again. Since darkness had quickly descended and we still needed to drive the 3 hours back to Austin, I let Mike, Trevor and Matt take over the skinning and quartering of the deer since they all had experience doing so and I had none. And so with a cooler full of at least 50 pounds of meat, we drove back to the city, tired but invigorated.

Having found the hunt so challenging and experienced those 5,000 acres as a verdant expanse where numerous herds could graze, breed, run and hide, it does make me defensive now when I start to tell people about the film and they say something like, " Oh you mean where they bring a deer out into a pen and then you shoot it?" I definitely can't speak for all the hunting operations in Texas and have no doubt there exists "canned hunting" where the animals live in much more confined areas and/or are habituated to eat from feeders that make them very easy to find and shoot. I find that type of hunting disturbing and agree it should be banned. But on the other hand I now know that not all game ranches are like that and agree with Ted Williams, who writes that "the general public has scant understanding of canned hunting" and "so frequently doesn't differentiate it from real hunting." Williams points out that many hunters are champions of "fair-chase" hunting while

deploring and fighting to ban canned hunting. [6]

My plan to leverage my Wendy Lou hunt into a film, or at least a scene was not a success. I edited together a 5 minute video of the hunt, underscored by Ted Nugent's "Stranglehold" and sent it to Mike along with my request to come back and film again—this time for use in a school project. Mike praised the video, was as friendly as ever and wrote, "I'd enjoy taking you around to do some more filming." However, as so often happened with my potential film shoot contacts, I tried to schedule something several times and his response was always be something like, "we're too busy now but maybe in a month or 2." However, the hunt was an important learning experience for me and I'm also pretty sure that my sizzle-reel hunt video did help me gain access to some of my subsequent subjects. One of these subjects was Trapper Burkett, an exotic wildlife capture professional.

TRAPPER BURKETT, THE COWBOY

I was first introduced to the concept of "exotic wildlife capture" by Joe Turner when who told me an incredible story about the time his buffalo jumped over his high fence and he had to enlist experts to capture them and bring them back. According to Joe, the crew used tranquilizers and chains to drag the buffalo back all the way from the highway and he compared these hired hands as "cowboys" with a lot of character. Of course my interest was piqued. Through online research, I found an article that

[6] Williams, Ted. "Real Hunters don't shoot pets." *Audubon Magazine*.

referenced some promising exotic capture professionals. One of these professionals was Trapper Burkett from Fredricksburg, who was quoted as saying:

> My father Joe Burkett was one of the first guys to use this method of coordinated work with ground crew and pilots, and we've gotten it down to a science. I think of myself as a modern day cowboy—instead of horses we use helicopters and four-wheelers, and nets instead of lariats.[7]

Figure 3: Shooting an axis with a net gun

Enthused by this evocation of cowboys and the myth of west, I tracked down Trapper's email address through his professional Facebook page, wrote to him about my film and shared the video I'd made of my hunt. I was shocked when he responded to my email immediately with: "Would be happy to help you. We will be doing different helicopter captures during the month of April. Also my sister in law is Lara Logan CBS

[7] Sanders, Chester. "Exotic Hoofstock." *Ranch & Rural Living Magazine,* September 2010.

60 min lady. I worked with her filming for the scimitar horned oryx piece for 60 min." Upon receiving Trapper's email I was probably the most excited and optimistic I was during the entire production process.

My heightened expectations, however, also led to my most intense episode of panic and despair about the film. When Trapper's next email said, "We are catching with the helicopter tomorrow in Mnt. Home…If you can't make it no worries there will be other days," I deferred because I couldn't get the optimal equipment or a camera operator in time and told him I'd definitely be up for the next capture, which I thought would take place in the next week. But almost as soon as I'd made that decision I started to regret it—I worried that I'd foregone the only shot to get what could be by far my best footage and this doubt escalated to a mild hysteria during the three weeks it took to hear back from Trapper about his next capture.

And so that period of intense distress ended with what felt like my biggest stroke of luck yet: Trapper ultimately invited me on not one, but two days of back-to-back captures. And those two days of shooting did yield arguably the best footage in the film—or at least the footage that people said they were most awed, shocked, disturbed or impressed by. I was especially fortunate that Trapper and his helicopter pilot let met affix a GoPro camera to the helicopter to capture thrilling, and for some horrifying, point-of-view footage of the helicopter chasing down axis deer and blackbuck antelope and the sniper leaning out the side of the open helicopter to torpedo nets from a home-made "net gun" down on the fleeing animal.

Mitchell Wilson & Hunting Ranches

Early on, I had hoped to narrow down to a more intimate narrative for the documentary by finding a commercial hunting ranch that I'd be able to visit multiple times over the course of a year and capture the point of views and experiences of the owner, his employees and maybe even a hunting customer.[8] I imagined that in the course of a year I'd be able to uncover and track a challenge or conflict faced by the owner or his employees (related to their animals and/or finances) that would provide plot and narrative tension. An ideal scenario, for example, would have been to find and film a rancher purchasing a new exotic, or herd of exotics, at an auction and then follow them back to the ranch to watch the evolution of his feelings about them, his efforts to keep them alive and healthy, and ultimately his selling and facilitating a hunt of one of his animals. Joe almost fit this bill, except that his wasn't a hunting ranch nor was he a hunter, and so focusing on just his story would omit that element which I felt was the most fascinating and crucial part of the widespread phenomenon.

I emailed and cold-called a dozen ranches between January and April of 2014, but found no willing participants until mid-April when my persistent follow-ups with a contact at The Patio Ranch resulted in a request from the owner to meet with me at his Austin office. I came across the Patio Ranch when I was searching for Bear Creek Ranch, which according to Dr. Mungall was the first Texas ranch to stock exotics, among

[8] I'm assuming the rancher would have been a man, although I would have preferred one of the few women ranch owners/operators.

which were axis, blackbuck and barasyngha. It turned out that Bear Creek had been renamed the Patio Ranch in 1960 when it was bought by Louis Stumberg, whose son Eric Stumberg is the current owner.

It was Eric who invited me to meet him at his Austin office to elaborate on the information I'd written in my email about my film and proposal. I sensed both before and during the meeting that it's real purpose was so Mr. Stumberg could try to gauge the honesty of my intentions and the probability that I was secretly an animal right activist. Eric would not have even offered to meet with me if it weren't for Dr. Mungall, whose name I dropped in my email and who vouched for me when Eric or one of his employees called her as a safeguard. Luckily, I passed Eric's muster in person and was given a green light to arrange a visit to the ranch hosted by the ranch manager Gary Ploch. When I spoke with Gary and told him I would ideally like to film some sort of action or event relating to animal husbandry, he suggested that I come film the "worming" of their baby ibex in the next few weeks. So I roped my friend and former UT M.F.A. film student, Tim Edwards, to travel with me to Hunt, Texas and discover what exactly worming an ibex meant.

What we discovered and captured on video was that these ibex were a goat species with rippling ridges covering their two long curved horns. "Worming" the babies apparently meant herding them into a trailer so as to administer each a shot of medication that protects them from the parasites they are prone to get from living in pens. As Mitchell Wilson, a ranch hand who became our interpreter and guide, told us, "they're

going to the bathroom where they're eating." Mitchell also explained that they kept the ibex and markhor (a rarer and more valuable goat species) in pens both to control their breeding – to produce foster trophy-worthy offspring – and to prevent them from escaping all together since they can jump unbelievably high. I found it confusing but compelling to see the juxtaposition between the great care they took at the Patio to keep exotics alive and healthy, but at the same time keeping them in a confined space which I imagine reduces their quality of life. However, it was apparent that Mitchell had to be the focus of my footage both because he was most physically available to us and because of his innocent charm.

So Patio Ranch did not yield the landowner, big picture storyline I hoped it would because the owner is an urban businessman to whom the ranch is a sentimental side project and the day-to-day manager wasn't very candid or charismatic, probably due to a preoccupation with flattering his employer's image and protecting his own employment. And at this point, it was April 2014, so I finally conceded that it was too late to realize my single story-line concept and graduate in the next six months.

Thus I shifted gears, and instead sought to devise a patchwork but cohesive film structure based on the rather disconnected footage I already had—which at that point was mainly Joe, Dr. Mungall, Trapper and Mitchell. Inspired by the "cowboy" epithet used for rugged exotic game professionals like Trapper, I conceived of a structure consisting of vignettes characterized by classic western archetypes. I hoped this would position exotic game ranching as the modernized version of a classic western ranching culture,

showing both how similar and different they were. In addition to Trapper and Mitchell "The Cowboys," I had Joe "The Rancher" and Dr. Mungall "The Explorer" or "Researcher." But I still felt these three archetypes alone painted an arbitrary and incomplete picture of Texas' exotic game industry.

CARL VANCE, THE HUNTER

My assessment, and that of the people I consulted, was that the component that would best round out this structure would be the perspective of a hunter. I knew this would not be easily obtained, but thought it would be another instance where the video of my hunt might prove influential. Also per my Texas hunting friend Reed's advice, I joined TexasHuntingForum.com in order to offer my services as a hunt videographer. Texas Hunting Forum is a website for discussions on anything and everything related to hunting in Texas. There are sub-forums about bird hunting, bow hunting, gun legislation, taxidermy and specifically about exotics hunting. There are also forums where guides and outfitters can advertise their services and others specifically for sharing personal hunt photos. I decided to post the following solicitation on both the Exotic Hunting and Photo forums:

> Wish you could relive/share your hunt on video? Hunting an exotic this spring? We're student filmmakers in Central TX, looking for experience and exciting material. Our crew of 2 (also hunters) will film your hunt for you with professional equipment and edit it into a "Highlights" video you can show all your friends, grandkids, etc...at NO COST. Private Message with questions or to see a sample of our work.

My hope was to find at least one hunter who would want a free hunt video (Reed insisted many of them would), in exchange for letting me use the footage from their hunt in my film. I only got two responses though: one was from someone telling me to buy their "e-book for hunting/fishing/outdoor shows" and the other was from a fellow who was going on an axis hunt in July. At the time I was hoping to graduate in August though, so a July shoot sounded too close to that deadline.

But then – in a rare moment of good fortune amidst what seemed like so much adversity – my friend Tyler revealed that his dad, Carl Vance, had hunted texotics and subsequently contacted me with the thrilling news that he was open to a film shoot. I immediately contacted Carl and since he didn't have any texotic hunts scheduled in the near future we agreed to meet at his house for an interview and tour of his taxidermy.

I was very pleased that the interview with Carl turned out to be quite like what I'd imagined those "Dallas Safari Club" portraits might turn into. My camera woman Alison Boland and I framed him amidst the looming taxidermy overwhelming his modest den, as he shared some unanticipated philosophies about exotics hunting and trophy hunting in general. Alison and I were especially excited that he let us film him shooting his bow and arrow from inside his kitchen. It is a surreal image to see him shoot his high-tech camo bow, not in the thick of the woods but in the quaint domesticity of his open kitchen. To me that image symbolizes the surrealism of the texotics industry and how it prefers to ignore its unnatural and manufactured premise. Unleashing the power

of a *tactical* bow inside a suburban kitchen seems about as strange and potentially dangerous as the hunger to hunt and/or own an endangered exotic animal seems to many.

Initially I had wanted to film a wealthy trophy hunter with a massive collection because I imagined it would be visually shocking and provide a liberal audience with a "bad guy" whose conspicuous consumption or macho posturing they could cast blame on. But the advantage of having Carl as "the hunter" is that his subtler attitude and humble circumstances make him harder to discount or reduce to a stereotype. So when Carl ultimately argues that "hunting is a part of conservation," it's easer to believe that he cares about the survival of these species—even though it doesn't seem like his primary motivation for hunting. For while Carl does speak of the animals on his wall - particularly the exotics - with a fond reverence, he also clearly loves the adventure and thrill of hunting and is often pre-emptively defensive against the negative stigma accorded trophy hunters.

Figure 4: Carl lets me try his bow

Chapter 4: CONCLUSION

> In a world of conservation reliance, the stories we tell have very real consequences. How we feel about an animal affects its survival. Our imagination has become an ecological force.[9]

About five years ago, I was working for the directors of the documentary "A Place at the Table," a film that sought to raise awareness and anger about hunger in the United States by portraying the diverse experiences of a few of these hungry Americans. The directors set out on the production of this film with this concept but with no actual

[9] Mooallem, Jon. "How the Teddy Bear Taught Us Compassion." TED. May 2014. Lecture.

characters, and so I was part of the many month long search to find people who were "food insecure" and willing to share their stories on camera. This turned out to be very challenging and there were many times where it seemed we might never find the range of characters needed to illustrate the documentary's intended message. Being part of this process, I came away with the philosophy that I would only pursue a documentary topic if it involved a character I started out having definite access to. Thus in retrospect, I am bemused by the irony that I neglected that philosophy for "A Kind of Wild" and rather undertook the same stressful and uncertain quest for characters that I'd experienced as part of "A Place at the Table." What I learned with the completion of my own documentary, however, is that the upside of this risky approach to documentary filmmaking is that it can result in a feeling of accomplishment in the face of adversity. Since it was extremely difficult to get access to almost anything involving the exotic game industry, I'm proud that I gradually gained the trust and the cooperation of a few generous folks and captured some unprecedented and illuminating footage.

What I also uncovered in the process of making this film were my own feelings and perspectives about the exotic game industry. I was initially drawn into the world by my affinity for experiencing new places and people and celebrating what makes them unique (or "exotic," some might say). But as I began to discover that many of the animals on these ranches were spectacular species that I'd never even heard of, I became perturbed that nearly no one I knew outside the ranching world had heard of them either - and they didn't even know what beauty they were missing out on. And while I don't

negate the argument made by exotics industry insiders (including those in my film) that the economics of hunting are responsible for conserving many species, I don't believe hunting is the only way to conserve them.

Personally, I'm not against hunting provided steps are taken to minimize the animal's suffering, but I wish that more of the non-hunting population contributed to the effort necessary to keep these animals around in free-ranging (non-zoo) environments. And from many vantage points, Texas ranches can be abundant, semi-natural habitats for these animals. But I believe that more of us can play a part in the conservation of these historic species, investing resources in nature preserves here or in native countries (which exist now but to a lesser extent than hunting ranches). However, as Dr. Mungall says in the film, "if you don't know about animals, if you can't see them - you don't tend to think about or value them and if they go extinct it doesn't make much difference to you." And so I hope this film plays an important role in spreading awareness and appreciation of these animals.

But I also hope the film encourages open-minded consideration of the ranching culture that has been perpetuating them for quite some time. Based on the many conversations I had about my film, it seems that most of the audience will be pre-disposed to disdain exotic game hunting and dislike or dismiss most of my characters. Many of them seem to think that, as one critic wrote,

> Hunting is all about proving some sort of dominion, validating superiority, inflating the macho ego at the expense and mockery of nature...Deep

> reverence doesn't seem to be a part of it. Love for the animals themselves beyond potential rich man's trophy, nowhere to be found.[10]

However, what I hope comes across in the film is that these characters -even though they condone or partake in hunting-do revere and often love these animals. So as someone who believes in the importance of cross-cultural dialogue, I want my predominantly urban, liberal audience to give consideration to these peoples' point of views. Claiming to love and preserve nature is one thing, but these people are on the ground working to ensure the survival of these species in the best way they know how.

A piece of collective filmmaking wisdom that I've been reminded of many times is that: Your film is more likely to succeed if its on a topic that you relate to personally and are passionate about. When I embarked on the production of this film, I found the world of exotic game ranching fascinating and exciting, but I did not have much of a personal connection to it or a strong opinion about it. And while I was forced to gradually form opinions and take stance-especially in the editing of the film-it is still a topic that I feel uncomfortable arguing about. While I still have to wait to see how the film is received, I wonder if the film would be more powerful if it had been born out of passion or outrage or personal experience.

---

[10] Morford, Mark. "Come Taste My Scimitar-Horned Oryx." *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 27, 2011.

References

Mashhood, Faraz. "New Safeguard Poised to Change Exotic Game Hunting in Texas." *Austin American-Statesman*, April 2, 2012. Accessed December 1, 2014, http://www.statesman.com/news/news/local/new-safeguard-poised-to-change-exotic-game-hunting/nRmhQ/

Morford, Mark. "Come Taste My Scimitar-Horned Oryx." *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 27, 2011. Accessed December 1, 2014., http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/morford/article/Come-taste-my-scimitar-horned-oryx-2349791.php

Mooallem, Jon. "How the Teddy Bear Taught Us Compassion." TED. May 2014. Lecture. Accessed December 1, 2014, https://www.ted.com/talks/jon_mooallem_the_strange_story_of_the_teddy_bear_and_what_it_reveals_about_our_relationship_to_animals/transcript?language=en

Recio, Maria. "New Rule Will Harm Endangered Antelope, Ranchers Say." *McClatchy DC News*, March 30, 2012. Accessed December 1, 2014, http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2012/03/30/143728_new-rule-will-harm-endangered.html?rh=1

Sanders, Chester. "Exotic Hoofstock." *Ranch & Rural Living Magazine*, September 2010. Accessed December 1, 2014, http://www.ranchmagazine.com/index.php/Exotics/exotic-hoofstock.html

Williams, Ted. "Real Hunters don't shoot pets." *Audubon Magazine*. Accessed December 1, 2014, http://archive.audubonmagazine.org/incite/incite1011.html